

# CURRY COLLEGE

Krista Selnau, who graduated from Curry College in 2009 with a double major in English and Politics and History, was the keynote speaker at the August 2015 Convocation ceremonies.

-----

Last week I tried something new. I stepped outside my comfort zone. I did something *really* scary. I felt like what I imagine you're feeling right now: excited, anxious, curious. Afraid. Last week I felt afraid and excited and anxious and *determined*. This wasn't the first time I've felt this weird mix of hope and fear, readiness and caution. I've felt this way before. I know I'll feel it again. Ten years ago I felt it, on my first day as a first-year student at Curry College. Like you, I found myself in a new place. Like you, I left behind family and friends for a new adventure. I didn't know where my future would lead. I didn't know if I would like my classes or my professors. I didn't know if I would make new friends. I didn't know much. I had an idea of the person I wanted to be and the places I wanted to go — but beyond that, my future was a question mark. And that felt both exciting and *really* scary. Embrace it. This is your journey to whoever *you* want to become, to the things *you've* dreamed of doing, to the adventures *you've* always imagined. But like any journey, *you* have to take the steps to get there. It won't happen on its own. But when you do take those steps? Really cool things happen.

So, what did I do last week that was *really* scary - I climbed my first mountain. With one leg. As an amputee.

-----

In the summer of 1996, when I was 9 years old, I fell off my bike. Two weeks later I noticed a small bump under my left knee. It was really painful. My parents figured I was an active kid and it was nothing to worry about. I was always coming home with new scrapes and bruises, usually from attempting new tricks on my bike or rollerblades that I hadn't yet mastered. One time, I had the bright idea to try to bounce a basketball off the front tire of my bike. I pedaled full speed down the hill, aligned my bike's front tire with the center of the basketball, and made contact — just as I had hoped. Except instead of sending the basketball flying up into the air and pedaling off to victory, my front wheel came to a sudden stop as soon as it made contact with the rubber of the basketball and I went flying over the handlebars and onto the sidewalk in front of me. I walked home — face, hands and legs bloodied — shaking, but mostly from disappointment that my trick hadn't happened as planned. This was two days before school picture day and we still have the picture to prove it. My parents didn't have to use their imagination to figure that this new bump was the result of yet another biking accident and that I would heal in time.

But instead of healing, another week passed. The bump under my knee grew and the pain became unbearable. My parents took me to see my pediatrician who ordered x-rays. He took one look at those x-rays and immediately sent us to an orthopedic surgeon at the children's hospital in Hartford. There,

the surgeon ordered more x-rays and scheduled me for a biopsy surgery the next day. By the end of that week, we knew that the bump below my knee wasn't the result of an active kid failing to land a *really* cool trick with her bike.

Instead: I had cancer. Specifically, osteosarcoma, a type of bone cancer and instead of returning to school the following week, I was going to start chemotherapy.

Three thoughts crossed my mind when my parents broke the news to me: The first: I would miss starting 4<sup>th</sup> grade with my friends? But I was in Mrs. Jandreau's class this year. She was my *favorite*. I had been looking forward to starting 4<sup>th</sup> grade *all* summer! Second: Cancer meant that I would be bald. I was going to lose all of my long blonde hair that I had spent the previous summer growing out. I was proud of how long it had grown. And, finally: The only people I knew who had cancer had died. I thought I would die, too.

But I didn't — I survived. After a year of chemotherapy, a bone resection surgery, the loss of my hair, an e-coli infection that sent me to the intensive care unit, and finally — the amputation of my left leg at the knee, right above where that bump had first surfaced — I survived.

And I was ready to live again.

I started 5<sup>th</sup> grade on time with my friends. I had worked so hard to get back to school that I knew I would never let anything stop me from pursuing my dreams. I definitely wasn't going to let the loss of a leg stop me. So, I walked up three flights of stairs to get to my 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom in an old school every day. It was a great way to break in a new prosthetic leg.

Every day that I climbed those stairs, no matter how long it took or how hard it was or how uncomfortable I felt with people staring at me because I had to take each step one at a time, I did it. Because I had dreams. Like *you*. I wanted to go to college one day. I wanted to be someone who helped others like my family, friends and community had helped me survive cancer. I just had to take the steps to get there.

-----

In December 2004, I was finally a senior in high school and I was applying to college. I had one application, one personal essay, one envelope, and one stamp. I was applying to just one college. I was applying for Early Admission acceptance to Curry College. The months prior I had toured colleges across the Northeast — more than I could count on two hands — dragging my parents along with me, across each campus, and through each campus tour. But none of these colleges seemed to fit. In fact, I remember one trip fairly well. My parents and I left our home in Bristol, CT before the sun rose to drive nearly four hours north to tour a college I was convinced would be the perfect fit. But we stayed for ten minutes before I made a face and told my parents I wanted to leave. We were all growing weary.

The last college on our list was a small liberal arts school in a town outside Boston called Milton. We drove onto Curry's beautiful campus and I knew — this was the place for me. I could picture myself here. Not only that, but it had everything I wanted — a strong Communications department (at that

time I imagined I would pursue a career in broadcast journalism), a small class size, a well-maintained campus, and the ideal location: close to Boston, and two hours from CT. It was far enough away from home for me to assert my newfound independence but close enough to return for a weekend visit should I feel homesick. Curry College was the perfect fit. So, I applied to just one college — Curry College, Early Admission, and when I received my acceptance letter early in 2005, I was *so* excited. I spent the rest of my senior year daydreaming about my new life as a college student. I could not wait to get here.

But, surprising my family, and myself I grew homesick after my first semester at Curry. I started having doubts. I wondered whether this was the right place for me. I looked into transferring. I toured colleges closer to home. I applied to, was accepted, and sent in my check to hold my spot at a large university in CT. I had a new plan. I was going to transfer after I completed my first year.

As the months passed, and my first year at Curry College was coming to an end, I started experiencing doubts about transferring. I thought about my time here — the friends I had made in the First Year Honors Program and the connections I had formed with my professors. Was I ready to give up these connections? Was I ready to transfer to a large university? Get lost in the crowd? Be nothing more than a number? I wasn't. The connections I made at Curry during that first year supported my dreams and challenged me to be more. Like the support I had received from my family and friends when I was fighting cancer, Curry and the Curry community encouraged me to pursue my dreams — whatever they may be. It was these connections that convinced me to stay at Curry. It was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

I realized that my education was only what I made it. Going to class was only a small part of it. Growing the connections I had made and being involved on campus was a larger part of it. I needed to be more of an active participant and less of a passive one. This was my life and my education and I was going to shape it.

Learning happens everywhere and all the time. You learn more by being an active learner than just passively taking in a lecture. Learning happens when you share your opinion in class, when you engage in debate, when you listen to others, when you seek out your professor during Office Hours for guidance, or a story about their life, and when you get involved. Learning happens when you engage and when you listen. That's what will make your education. Your life.

I'll tell you what — there are some really cool people with really cool life stories here at Curry College. But you won't know that, unless you take the time to find out.

After I decided to stay at Curry I got involved in everything I could. I tried everything. President of the Gay-Straight Alliance. Founded the English Literature Club. Politics & History Club. President of the Alexander Graham Bell Honor Society. Completed and defended my thesis in the Honors Scholar Program. Worked at Levin Library. Worked as a research assistant for Prof. Bill Nancarrow. Even tried acting with Curry Theater. And finally, had a yearlong Internship with the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy — the result of a breakthrough during an Experiential Learning seminar — that cemented my desire to go to law school to use a law degree to help others.

-----

After graduating from Curry College in 2012 with a degree in English and Politics & History, I went to Suffolk University Law School and I've worked as an attorney for the last three years in the public interest and public health field. I'm currently finishing work on a post-graduate Equal Justice Works Fellowship at Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock. The fellowship offered the opportunity to write a proposal for my dream job and then matched me with sponsors to make it happen; in my case — Walmart and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld. I designed my fellowship project to expand upon an existing medical-legal partnership at Arkansas Children's Hospital to focus primarily on serving the needs of kids with cancer, sickle cell disease, hemophilia, and other blood disorders and their families. I work collaboratively with doctors, nurses, and social workers every day to meet the unmet legal needs negatively affecting the health of this population. The best part is all of my services are free to the patients and their families.

Curry College provided me with the education, the tools, and the support I needed to succeed to go to law school, and to be an attorney and a social entrepreneur. But if I had been a passive participant in my education instead of an active participant, I wouldn't have had the same experience. I wouldn't have been nearly as successful in pursuing my dreams.

It's not just at college that I ask you to be an active participant, but also in life.

Getting involved shaped my college education. Getting involved led to law school. Getting involved and taking risks, *scary* risks, led to my Equal Justice Works Fellowship. Getting involved and putting myself out there, even at the risk of feeling uncomfortable, led me to my dreams. And now, I get to do what I love every day. I get to help people.

Go to class. Raise your hand. Share your opinion. Debate. Talk to your professors. Join a club. Start a club. Try something new. Embrace that feeling of being uncomfortable and recognize it for it is: personal growth.

-----

Remember how I told you I tried something new last week? Outdoor rock climbing as an amputee? Let me tell you, rock climbing is hard. Rock climbing with one leg is *really* hard. I've been climbing at a climbing gym for the past three years but until last week, I never thought that I would actually climb a mountain. Sure, it had been on my bucket list for quite some time. I always thought I would do it one day. But I never took the steps to set up an outdoor climb. Instead, I climbed indoors at the gym and imagined how "one day" I would climb a mountain. I'll do it next week. Maybe later this year. One of these days, I'll climb a mountain. And I kept putting it off. My dream for myself became a "one of these days" dream. Meaning that I would probably never do it. When you find that loophole within your own thought process to justify to yourself why you aren't doing something or why it's okay to put that one thing off another day, or why tomorrow you'll start getting more sleep, cutting down on coffee, eating healthier. It's just one more day. What's the big deal?

The big deal is that you'll continue to find that loophole and you'll continue to justify "I'll do it tomorrow" for another week, another month, another year. When you find that loophole, it's hard to unfind it. When you find that loophole, you're cheating yourself.

Don't cheat yourself. What's your dream? What do you want to do? Do it today. Make your goals for your dreams black and white. Because when a goal is concrete and well defined, it's a lot easier to keep that promise to yourself because there's no loophole. For example, "I'll climb a mountain this Friday" is a lot harder to get out of than "I'll climb a mountain one of these days."

Get involved at Curry and do it today. Seek out those connections. Join a club. Start a club about something that interests you. Actively seek out opportunities that make you feel uncomfortable. Meet new people. Stay after class to talk to your professor. Learn. Take it all in. Challenge yourself. Become who you know you are meant to be. Listen to your instinct. Follow what feels right. If you don't know what your dreams are yet, or who you want to be, or what you want to do, or what interests you have — try it all.

Last week, I tried something new, something that definitely made me feel uncomfortable. I tried outdoor rock climbing. With leg. As an amputee.

I wouldn't say I scaled that mountain. I would be lying if I told you I was quick or that I didn't slip. I'm not going to tell you I made it to the top with no bruises, or cuts. And I'm not going to tell you it was easy. But I did it. I climbed that mountain. And as I pulled myself over the top, and turned around to sit on the ledge, I looked out across the world below me and I saw how far I had come. I did it.

Who will you become? What will your impact be? Embrace the things that scare you. Find opportunities that make you feel uncomfortable. Put yourself out there. Be an active participant. Be fearless. You *can* do it.

Welcome to Curry College Class of 2019!